

The Haymarket Riot

The Haymarket Riot on 4 May 1886 in Chicago, Illinois is the origin of international *May Day* observances and in popular literature inspired the caricature of "a bomb-throwing anarchist." The causes of the incident are still controversial, although deeply polarized attitudes separating the business and working communities in late 19th century Chicago are generally acknowledged as having precipitated the tragedy and its aftermath.

Strike at the McCormick Reaper Plant

On May 1, 1886, labor unions organized a strike for an eight-hour work day in Chicago. By 21st century standards, working conditions in the city were miserable, with most workers working ten to twelve hour days, often six days a week under sometimes dangerous conditions. On May 3 striking workers met near the McCormick Harvesting Machine Co. plant. Chicago police attacked the strikers without warning, killing two, wounding several others and sparking outrage in the city's working community.

Local anarchists distributed fliers calling for a rally at Haymarket Square, then a bustling commercial center. These fliers alleged police had murdered the strikers on behalf of business interests and urged workers to seek justice. One flier insisted they fight back with weapons:

To arms, we call you, to arms!

However, few copies of this version are known to have been distributed.

Rally at the Haymarket Square

The rally began peacefully under a light rain on the evening of May 4. Anarchist leader August Spies spoke to the large crowd while standing in an open wagon on a side street. According to many witnesses Spies said he was not there to incite anyone. Meanwhile a large number of on-duty police officers watched from nearby. The crowd was so calm that Mayor Carter Harrison, Sr. who had stopped by to watch, walked home early. Some time later the police ordered the rally to disperse and began marching in formation towards the speakers' wagon. A lit, fused bomb whistled over the heads of onlookers, landed near the police line and exploded, killing a policeman, Mathias J. Degan (seven other



policemen later died from their injuries). The police immediately opened fire on the crowd, injuring dozens. Many of the wounded were afraid to visit hospitals for fear of being arrested. A total of eleven people died.

Trial, Executions, and Pardons

Eight people connected directly or indirectly with the rally and its anarchist organisers were charged with Degan's murder. Five were German immigrants while a sixth was of German descent. In their trial, the prosecution never offered evidence connecting any of the defendants with the bombing but argued that the person who had thrown the bomb had been incited to do so by the defendants, who as a result were equally responsible. The jury returned guilty verdicts for all eight defendants, with death sentences for seven. The sentencing sparked more outrage in labor circles, resulted in protests around the world and made the defendants international political celebrities and heroes. Meanwhile the press had published often sensationalized accounts and opinions about the incident which tended to polarize public reaction. For example, journalist George Frederic Parsons wrote a piece for the *Atlantic Monthly* articulating the fears of middle-class Americans concerning labor radicalism and asserting the belief that workers had only themselves to blame for their troubles.

After the appeals had been exhausted Illinois Governor Richard James Oglesby commuted two of the convicts to sentences to life in prison. On the eve of his scheduled execution one prisoner committed suicide in his cell using a smuggled dynamite cap, which he reportedly held in his mouth like a cigar (the blast blew off half his face and he survived in agony for several hours). The next day, November 11, 1887, the other four were hanged together before a public audience. August Spies was widely quoted as having said, "The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today." Witnesses reported that the condemned did not die when they dropped, but strangled to death slowly, a sight which left the audience visibly shaken.

On June 26, 1893 Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld signed pardons for the three convicts serving prison sentences, after having concluded all eight defendants were innocent (the pardons signalled his own political end).

The police commander who ordered the dispersal was later convicted of unrelated corruption. The bomb thrower was never identified, although some anarchists privately indicated they had later learned his identity but kept quiet to avoid further violence and death. The trial is often referred to by scholars as one of the most serious miscarriages of justice in United States history.